

# Essential, common, but so hard to find

High school student Nadya Okamoto formed Camions of Care to provide feminine hygiene products to women on the streets

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**M**enstruals, monthlies, menses, periods, “that time of the month”: Whatever you want to call it, menstruation is a natural and regular part of life for many women. But for women experiencing homelessness, finding a pad or tampon can be harder than finding a meal or a new pair of socks.

“I took a towel and cut it in pieces and used a plastic bag to wrap them with... I would wash one, let it dry while I was using another so I could rotate,” says Rayna Blackburn. She describes how she would fashion her own pads in the times she couldn’t afford or find any at local shelters. “I’ve been left with nothing where they wouldn’t hand me anything except a paper towel.”

A mother and Army veteran, Blackburn has experienced homelessness on and off for the past several years and has seen for herself how desperation can lead many women sleeping rough to resort to their own unsafe alternatives.

“I’ve seen them have to wear Depends pullups. I’ve seen the have to wear them for hours and hours. I’ve seen them take (tampons) and rinse them out and reuse them. It’s not OK.” Having been left bleeding and without options several times before, Blackburn now makes sure she is always prepared for her period. “I carry a baggie with me wherever, now. They’ve got me out of all my washrags and towels.”

Shelters are the first stop for pads and tampons for women who are homeless and thousands of others living in poverty in Portland. And according to the office of Multnomah County Primary Care Clinics, clinics have supplies of tampons and pads for use in emergencies, but not enough to distribute regularly or, say, monthly. Lack of access to proper menstrual products can mean less safe alternatives, such as paper towels, washcloths and even socks, become the only option. These items are often used for longer than is safe, for lack of a fresh option or clean place to wash up. Improper products, lack of a clean space to change a tampon or pad, or extended use of menstrual products can lead to serious bacterial infections, such as toxic shock syndrome, which can be fatal.

Some aid agencies keep small supplies of pads and tampons on hand, but even then, they are available only to those who ask.

“Talking to organizations, they were telling me that they have the resources but they don’t provide the service unless people request them because they’re respecting

that it’s a private topic,” says Nadya Okamoto. “For some reason that bothered me, because this happens to every woman!”

Okamoto responded by starting Camions of Care, an organization that provides free care packages of menstrual products for distribution by organizations in Portland, including the Letty Owings Center at Central City Concern, St. Andre Bessette Church and Northeast Emergency Food Program. Every weekend, Camions of Care and their team of volunteers assemble care packages of feminine hygiene products, complete with enough pads, tampons and fresh wipes to last a woman six days, the average length of a period.

“The demand for our care packages is nothing I expected,” says Okamoto.

Since its first delivery day in December, Camions of Care has delivered more than 350 care packages to women experiencing homelessness in Portland. Calls from new organizations looking to partner with the group keep coming in. Street Roots is among many organizations now partnering with Camions of Care to distribute supplies the packages.

“If the word tampon comes up, you know there are some people who immediately turn bright red,” says Camion’s Development Director Giselle Cohen, “and that’s a problem.”

Lack of discussion means many women simply don’t know what resources are available and organizations don’t know just how many menstrual products are needed.

“These are really natural needs,” says Okamoto, “but the idea that these topics are private doesn’t only exist in the society but also within individuals.”

Camions of Care wants to destroy the view of pads and tampons as mere “comfort items” and emphasize their necessity to a healthy, functional life, especially for women working to get out of homelessness.

“If you don’t have the supplies to handle your own body, you can’t advocate for yourself in the same way,” says Cohen. “It means you can’t function. You can’t be looking for a job during that time. So that’s four to six days a month where you have to basically be secluded.”

Having experienced homelessness and life in shelters herself, Okamoto understood firsthand the struggles women staying in shelters and sleeping outside face first-hand.

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**All of Camions of Care’s eight-person team and the majority of its roughly 50 volunteers are high school students.**



PHOTO BY REUBEN SCHAFFIR

From left, Giselle Cohen, Vincent Forand and Nadya Okamoto with Camions of Care say the lack of discussion about feminine products means the scope of the need isn’t truly known.

thing that I had to sacrifice first so that my family could have food and pay for our rent was these feminine hygiene products and resources like this,” she says.

The testimonies of the women she spoke to was at the forefront of her mind when Okamoto started Camions of Care last year while still in her junior year of high school at Catlin Gabel School. When her teacher nominated her to attend a youth leadership

forum in Washington D.C. and apply for a grant, the idea for a community service organization came to her easily. When she shared the idea of Camions of Care with judges at ANN Inc., the corporation behind the Ann Taylor

family of retail clothing stores and the sponsors of the youth leadership program, it awarded her a grant of \$2,500 to start the organization. With funds and a plan in hand, Okamoto recruited the members of her organization from her various classes at school. All of Camions of Care’s eight-person team and the majority of its roughly 50 volunteers are high school students.

Calls, emails and meetings for the organizations take place between class periods, during lunch and on weekends. Camion’s Operations Director Vincent Forand uses his parents’ car to make deliveries of care packages and stores Camion’s inventory of thousands of pads and tampons in the guest bedroom of his family’s home. “Luckily we don’t get too many guests,” he laughs. Naturally, inspiring youth became part of their focus as well.

“Empowering other teenage leaders to speak on a topic that is in our society labeled as taboo, on a topic that makes some people uncomfortable,” says Okamoto

“I think they’re geniuses,” says Debbie Borgelt, director of Outpatient and Residential Chemical Dependency Services of Central City Concern at the Letty Owings Center, a treatment center for new and expecting mothers. “These wonderful caring people saw a need and just met it.” Before

connecting with Camions of Care, the women at the Letty Owings Center had to raise money to afford their menstrual care products.

“They would do whatever they could,” says Borgelt. Now, the burden of getting these menstrual products to the center’s women is largely relieved.

“It’s money we don’t have to spend on those products, so we can spend it elsewhere for programming and services.” Borgelt also emphasizes the therapeutic value of Camions of Care’s service. “It tells (the women in treatment) that somebody out there in the general public cares for them, and that’s priceless in treatment. It helps them believe in themselves.”

So far, Camions of Care has received encouraging support, with Cascade AIDS Project donating condoms and Seventh Generation donating tampons and fresh wipes for distribution in their care packages. Their massive hauls of tampons and pads in the check-out line of Wal-Mart also inspires interest from observers.

“It was amazing that every single woman that we’ve met and we’ve talked to, they have all said, ‘Wow, I never thought of that being a concern,’” says Forand. “It is on their mind, it is there, but they never have the opportunity to speak out.”

Public support is strong, but its work is far from over. The organization cannot survive without an increase of regular support. In an effort to ramp up donations and exposure, Camions of Care is sponsoring a donations drive of tampons, pads and clothes at both Catlin Gabel and Lincoln high schools throughout February. And while the group’s plans are ambitious, their knowledge of the essentiality of their organization gives them confidence that Camions of Care will continue far past the students’ graduation dates. “I think once it gets established it’s going to be impossible to shut down,” says Cohen.

“This is the type of issue that once you start talking about it, makes so much sense that you can’t stop.” Okamoto agrees. “With a strong board and a strong leadership team we’re confident that Camions of Care is gonna be here for a while.”

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